

For Your Information

November 6, 2012

The following article written by Eric Schulzke appeared in [Deseret News](#) on November 6, 2012.

When a punk rock group got sent to prison for a protest at a Moscow cathedral earlier this year, Katrina Lantos Swett was an ocean away— but not all that surprised. To her, the harsh reaction reflected a tight link between the Putin regime and the Russian Orthodox Church.

The severe sentence imposed on protestors for trespassing in a Moscow church — the court called it “hooliganism” — may at first glance seem like an odd focal point for a U.S. religious freedom advocate. The punkers were, after all, behaving somewhat irreligiously.

But Swett sees rule of law as being at the core of religious freedom, and sees the disproportionate punishment in Russia as a threat to conscience, and thus to religious liberty.

“It is not a healthy or a safe thing for a nation to view its national identity as wrapped up in the orthodoxy of *any* faith,” Swett said.

Swett is something of a unicorn. A convert to Mormonism, she describes herself as “both completely Jewish and also deeply Latter-day Saint.” And, she might add, she is also a committed Democrat. A rare blend all around.

Now, she's also one of the most important defenders of religious freedom in the U.S., if not the world. In March, she became head of the U.S. Commission for International Religious Freedom, a little known oversight body commissioned by Congress to monitor abuse of religious minorities abroad and keep U.S. foreign policy attending to the issue.

Created out of fears that U.S. diplomacy tends to slight religious freedom in favor of trade relations and geopolitical strategy, USCIRF's watch lists over the past decade have raised hackles from Vietnam, which has been oppressing Christian minorities for years, to Turkey, which was outraged to be included on the 2012 list.

USCIRF to date has focused on monitoring and reporting religious freedom abuses and listing consistent violators, detailing abuses in an annual report and lobbying for sanctions.

Swett wants to expand that vision to get the U.S. public thinking and talking more about international religious freedom.

Something of a unicorn

The daughter of two Hungarian Jewish Holocaust survivors, Swett's life work was shaped before she was born. Her path was blazed by her father, Tom Lantos, an outspoken human rights advocate who represented San Francisco in Congress for 27 years.

After her dad passed away, Swett took over leadership of the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights & Justice, which carries on his work through U.S. Congressional fellowships for foreign students, an annual prize issued to notable human rights leaders, and grants offered to deserving advocacy groups.

Swett sees her hybrid LDS and Jewish identities as “very relevant” to her work on religious freedom. “Both of these faith communities have experienced intense persecution at different times,” she said.

“Being raised by Holocaust survivors who saw most of their family and friends and lives destroyed because of religious bigotry drove home to me how fundamental freedom of religion is to building a decent society.”

An unpaid group of rights advocates appointed by leaders of both congressional parties and the president, USCIRF’s capacity lies strictly in its power to focus attention, both of the world and of the U.S. government.

Swett’s vision for USCIRF is to expand its visibility at home so as to further its effectiveness in enhancing religious liberty abroad.

Eyes on Russia

Swett sees religious persecution in Russia as part of a larger picture of the Russian state suppressing dissent.

“After Putin won the election,” Swett said, “you saw him revert to type. He has clearly stepped up efforts to crush and strangle dissent.”

Swett has focused for years on the case of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a former Russian plutocrat who has been languishing in Russian prisons since 2003. Khordorkovsky, Swett said, had a change of heart, embraced Western norms, and began bucking the Kremlin pressure.

With her added portfolio on religious freedom, Russia’s religious freedom concerns took on sharper focus for Swett. In August she joined fellow USCIRF member Robbie George, a Princeton jurisprudence professor, in coauthoring a piece in *The Moscow Times* calling out Russia for “religious extremism” laws aimed at minorities.

“Extremism” in the new law, Swett and George noted, means teaching the “exclusivity, superiority or inferiority of citizens” based on religious doctrine, a definition that could condemn most religions.

Swett and George noted a troubling Russian track record in persecuting Muslim readers of the 19th century Turkish theologian Said Nursi, whose writings grapple with the theological struggles of faith in modernity.

“Fifteen Nursi readers have stood trial on extremist charges related to banned materials, and five have served the maximum three-year prison terms,” they noted. And “in a chilling throwback to the Soviet era, authorities want Amir Abuyev, a Nursi reader in Kaliningrad, to undergo a psychiatric evaluation,” they added.

Jehovah’s Witnesses are also under fire. Swett and George noted that in May, “Authorities conducted at least 16 raids in the Orenburg region on Jehovah’s Witness homes and places of worship, including a 15-hour raid on an elderly couple’s home.”

Freedom to leave

“I crossed party lines to nominate Katrina for the chairmanship,” said George in a separate interview. “She and I agree on a lot of issues.” Republican House Speaker John Boehner appointed George, while Senator Majority Leader Harry Reid chose Swett.

The conservative Catholic and the liberal Mormon odd couple, who comprise two of the eight USCIRF commissioners, have found a shared purpose and have been using their USCIRF perch call support individual religious rights, not just the claims of religious communities.

They followed up their *Moscow Times* article with an October piece in *Foreign Policy* opposing blasphemy laws proposed for new constitutions in Muslim majority lands, including Egypt and Tunisia.

George, who also serves on the Deseret News advisory board, shares with Swett a vision of religious freedom that reaches to those who want to change religions, or even who want to abandon religion altogether — both core values of the International Declaration of Human Rights.

“We need robust protections for those whose beliefs are not religious, who want to exercise their freedom to leave their religion, perhaps to abandon their beliefs, to embrace a different set of values,” Swett said.

“Sometimes the threat to religious freedom comes from the community that claims jurisdiction

over the individual,” George said, citing the problem of blasphemy and anti-conversion laws.

In short, George argues, and Swett agrees, is that a religious freedom agenda that focuses purely on protecting religious communities could slight a core of religion, which lies in the free individual conscience.

George said he has no problem with a religious community using social sanctions to maintain consensus within its ranks. But he draws a sharp line when “civil authority is harnessed by religious communities to punish someone they claim authority over but who wishes to be free from that community.”

“I don’t subscribe to any kind of multiculturalism that would regard it as imperialistic for us to protect people from bad acts that are done in the name of religion,” George said. “Whether its female genital mutilation, or executing people for blasphemy, or anything else.”

An expanding agenda

“Katrina and I came in with the same agenda,” George said. “We had never met. We had various connections. We had never met, but we had the same beliefs and the same agenda for the commission.”

“I would like to see USCIRF let people know what it is we do and why it’s important,” Swett said. “We have a lot of debates in this country about the role of faith in public dialogue. I think there would be a lot of interest in understanding how strong protections for religious freedom will strengthen global security.”

Religious freedom advocates have long argued that religious liberty is a “canary in the coal mine,” and that abuses of religious minority signal deep problems in societies and governments — problems that will soon lead to internal and regional instability.

Swett thus wants to push USCIRF to integrate religious freedom into the broader human rights movement and into global diplomacy more generally.

“Over a year ago Clinton gave a landmark speech on internet freedom,” Swett said, “outlining State Department initiatives to increase access to the Internet in closed societies, circumventing firewalls, etc..”

Since Swett and George see eye to eye on the centrality of individual liberty in religious freedom, they both have latched onto the importance of Internet freedom. “Think of China and North Korea, any place where you have these kinds of problems, and you see how valuable Internet freedom can be,” George said.

Halfway through their first year on the commission, George and Swett have already coauthored two major opinion pieces, in addition to their intensive work reviewing reports and conducting meetings.

The personal connection in a shared vision is, they both believe, is precisely the kind of bipartisan and ecumenical cooperation needed to move USCIRF’s agenda to the next level.

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